

2003

The Soldier's Strife: An Introspective View Through the Work of Tim O'Brien

Mandy Solomon

Eastern Illinois University

This research is a product of the graduate program in [English](#) at Eastern Illinois University. [Find out more](#) about the program.

Recommended Citation

Solomon, Mandy, "The Soldier's Strife: An Introspective View Through the Work of Tim O'Brien" (2003). *Masters Theses*. 1407.
<https://thekeep.eiu.edu/theses/1407>

This is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Theses & Publications at The Keep. It has been accepted for inclusion in Masters Theses by an authorized administrator of The Keep. For more information, please contact tabruns@eiu.edu.

THESIS/FIELD EXPERIENCE PAPER REPRODUCTION CERTIFICATE

TO: Graduate Degree Candidates (who have written formal theses)

SUBJECT: Permission to Reproduce Theses

The University Library is receiving a number of request from other institutions asking permission to reproduce dissertations for inclusion in their library holdings. Although no copyright laws are involved, we feel that professional courtesy demands that permission be obtained from the author before we allow these to be copied.

PLEASE SIGN ONE OF THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS:

Booth Library of Eastern Illinois University has my permission to lend my thesis to a reputable college or university for the purpose of copying it for inclusion in that institution's library or research holdings.

8/15/03
Date

I respectfully request Booth Library of Eastern Illinois University **NOT** allow my thesis to be reproduced because:

Author's Signature

Date

The Soldier's Strife:

An Introspective View Through the Work of Tim O'Brien
(TITLE)

BY

Mandy

Solomon

FIELD EXPERIENCE

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master of Arts in English

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

2003

YEAR

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THIS FIELD EXPERIENCE BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING
THIS PART OF THE GRADUATE DEGREE CITED ABOVE

8/4/03
DATE

8-5-03
DATE

This work is lovingly dedicated to my Grandma Betty Lou, who will forever be “fat and sassy” in my heart and mind.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank my parents, Jim and Kathy Solomon, for their insistence that I continue my education and their love. You've been ever so patient and supportive! Words really cannot express my gratitude.

I would also like to thank my brother and sister, Jim and Christie, for their encouragement and for listening to my plans and schemes.

I am especially grateful to my dear friend, Autumn Williams. Thank you for the confidence you helped me find in myself and for being who you are. I probably would have thrown the towel in long ago if it wasn't for you.

Dr. Searle, thank you for your insight and kindness. It's been a long journey, but with the assistance of chocolate and perseverance, I made it.

I would also like to thank Dr. Swords and Dr. Kory for their careful eyes and sagacity.

Bob, thanks for your advice and for being an extra set of eyes!

A special thank you goes out to the faculty in the English Department for keeping me around and helping me realize my potential.

To the crew at Roc's, thanks for keeping me sane! Go Meatballs!

To my friends: Andrew, Emily, Mandy B., Teresa, Kim, Kelly, Rachael, Shannon, and Abby, thanks for being there.

Contents

Introduction	1
I. <u>If I Die in a Combat Zone</u> : Guilt, Courage, and Visions of War	4
II. <u>Going After Cacciato</u> : The Imaginary Configuration of War	18
III. <u>The Things They Carried</u> : Truth and Storytelling	39
Works Cited	61

Introduction

Tim O'Brien summarizes his experience in the Vietnam War with a few direct statements from If I Die in a Combat Zone:

Men die. Fear hurts and humiliates. It's hard to be brave. It's hard to know what bravery *is*. Dead human beings are heavy and awkward to carry, things smell different in Vietnam, soldiers are dreamers, drill sergeants are boors, some men thought the war was proper and others didn't and most didn't care. Is that the stuff for a morality lesson, even for a theme? (22-3)

O'Brien's summarization pinpoints the emotional core of his writing regarding that conflict. With If I Die, Going After Cacciato, and The Things They Carried O'Brien revisits the trauma of combat and reflects upon his involvement in and recollections of the Vietnam War.

In an interview with Stephen Kaplan, O'Brien explains the correlation between writing and his experience in war: "My concerns as a human being and my concerns as an artist have at some point intersected in Vietnam – not just the physical place, but in the spiritual and moral terrain of Vietnam" (101). He goes on to say, "One tries to wrestle new meanings and new stories out of the concerns of one's life. One has to care about the material. I care about issues of courage, and I care about issues of storytelling, and I care about issues of mysteriousness, and I care about cyclical patterns of plot" (Kaplan 101). O'Brien's writing, by intertwining experience and craft, presents itself as a window to the Vietnam War, one that reveals many angles. As Li Van Hgoc states in Going After Cacciato, "Things may be viewed from many angles. From Down below, or from inside out, you often discover entirely new understandings" (91). Throughout this

comprehensive work, I will demonstrate how O'Brien utilizes specific narrative techniques to vocalize the moral quandaries of the soldier, which in turn offers the reader different perspectives of the Vietnam War. By establishing how the three distinct works revolve around matters of guilt, courage, and the attempt to arrive at an understanding of the Vietnam War I will convey how, through narration, O'Brien portrays the internally emotional and externally intense aspects of combat.

This work is separated in sections where I discuss the significance of the narrative structure of O'Brien's novels and the soldier's strife. In each section, I focus on one text, evaluating the narrative approach O'Brien uses to illustrate the soldier's despair, and also demonstrate how, although O'Brien provides the reader with different perspectives on the war through writing, the tone of each work reflects the uncertainty one associates with the Vietnam War. The uncertainty of If I Die in a Combat Zone, Going After Cacciato, and The Things They Carried is rooted in the soldier's inner battle fought during and long after the Vietnam War, a fact that O'Brien expresses through his own commentary and fiction. O'Brien divulges to his reading audience in If I Die in a Combat Zone, "I was persuaded then and I remain persuaded now, that the war was wrong" (18). I will display how O'Brien's beliefs conflicted with his involvement in the Vietnam War and echoes throughout his writing.

Throughout this work, I exhibit how from this conviction uncertainty stems and although there are so many uncertainties for the soldier, the one thing that the soldier is sure of, that the war is wrong, conflicts with his obligation and hinders arriving at an understanding of his experience in the Vietnam War. O'Brien asserts in an interview with Lynn Wharton that "As a literary matter, though, these experiences of life – like I

guess all experiences: lovers, wars, everything else – are the material I have to make stories from” (237). In each section I convey how O’Brien’s writing delivers a panorama of the Vietnam War through his reliance upon his convictions, experiences as a soldier, and imagination. To illustrate the overtones of guilt and incertitude within O’Brien’s memoir and fiction, I concentrate on O’Brien’s insistence upon his conviction by depicting the barbarity of the Vietnam War.

In an interview with Tobey Herzog, O’Brien emphasizes the role of the storyteller: “But good storytellers have to be in a way aware of what they are doing as storytellers, what they are selecting to put in and selecting out. Aware of cadence. Aware of contradiction” (97). In conclusion, I demonstrate how If I Die in a Combat Zone, Going After Cacciato, and The Things They Carried, in terms of the Vietnam War literary genre, depict the uncertainty of the Vietnam War, extending an internal, imaginative, and uncompromising view of the war. I will connect how O’Brien’s awareness as a storyteller and his dependency upon experience are discernible in the three works in the sense that O’Brien’s writing recognizes the ethical quandary of the Vietnam War. Ultimately, I want to convey how, with each work O’Brien relies on his experience during the Vietnam War and illuminates its intensity through a different voice, delivering a “story truth” for those who were not there to witness or endure the Vietnam War.

If I Die in a Combat Zone: Guilt, Courage, and Visions of War

Tim O'Brien's memoir, If I Die in a Combat Zone, depicts the internal and external battle O'Brien endured during the Vietnam War. O'Brien presents his opposition to this conflict throughout If I Die, utilizing personal narrative and storytelling to relay how his convictions hindered his involvement in the war. The personal aspect of If I Die presents the uncertainty of the Vietnam War, from America's involvement to O'Brien's personal beliefs, and how this resulted in an intellectual and ethical battle for O'Brien. In his memoir, O'Brien also reflects upon his experience to portray the barbarity of combat. Tobey Herzog notes that If I Die is saturated with "recurring themes and incidents presented from Tim O'Brien's various perspectives" (45). O'Brien's first person commentary vocalizes the uncertainty and guilt he associates with the Vietnam War while the "war stories" he tells illuminate the emotions he attributes to the conflict. Herzog goes on to write:

Readers see the war through O'Brien's own changing viewpoint: an author who feels guilty about his decision to go to war; a Vietnam Veteran – neither cynic, patriot, or apologist – who has carried on a typical love-hate relationship with the war and himself; a thoughtful person preoccupied with political and moral issues of bravery and fear; an insightful observer of human beings, relationships, and the ironies of war; and a budding novelist experimenting with a tightly crafted narrative style, dramatic heightening, and psychological probing in order to develop the writer's skills he will need later. (45)

The instances of wartime that O'Brien recollects and illustrates throughout his memoir concern matters of courage and exhibit how one's conscience factors into combat,

ultimately conveying the guilt O'Brien harbors toward the war. As an introspective narrator and storyteller, O'Brien depicts the harrowing nature of the Vietnam War, drawing on his experience as a participant in the conflict to depict the mental anguish and the everlasting images of warfare to his audience.

From his personal point of view, O'Brien voices the moral quandaries he was confronted with during the Vietnam War. In the chapter entitled "Beginning," O'Brien states outright to his reading audience, "The war, I thought was wrongly conceived and poorly justified" (Die 18). In If I Die, O'Brien imparts how the Vietnam War made him question his own ethics and the concept of courage. O'Brien illustrates these uncertainties in a conversation with Captain Edwards in the chapter "Escape," "But assuming, sir – just assuming – that I truly believe the war is wrong. Is it then also wrong to go off and kill people? If I do that, what happens to my soul? And if I don't fight, if I refuse, then I've betrayed my country, right?" (Die 60). War is not an enticing concept for O'Brien; he does not appear as a gallant soldier with delusions of heroism. Rather, O'Brien presents himself as a thoughtful and knowledgeable man who simply wants to lead a respectable life, one that is representative of his morals. The Vietnam War, however, with all its ambiguities and callousness, challenges O'Brien's sense of self. In the chapter "Wise Endurance," O'Brien expresses how his convictions and personal beliefs clashed with the Vietnam War:

There is a phrase: courage of conviction. Doubtless, I thought, conviction can be right or wrong. But I had reasons to oppose the war in Vietnam. The reasons could be murmured like the Psalms on a cold-moon Vietnam night: Kill and fight only for certain causes; certain causes somehow involve self-evident truths; Hitler's

blitzkrieg, the attack on Pearl Harbor, these were somehow self-evident grounds for using force, just as bullyism will, in the end, call for force; but the war in Vietnam drifted in and out of human lives, taking them or sparing them like a headless, berserk taxi hack, without evident cause, a war fought for uncertain reasons. (Die 128)

With If I Die, O'Brien intertwines personal commentary and specific recollections to accentuate his intellectual and emotional standoff with the Vietnam War.

In an interview, Larry McCaffrey asks O'Brien if he still believes the passage from If I Die, "Can a foot soldier teach anybody anything important about a war, merely for having been there? I think not. He can tell war stories" (278). O'Brien's response reflects his incentive for writing:

Absolutely. What can you teach people, just from having been in a war? By "teach" I mean provide insight, philosophy. The mere fact of having witnessed violence and death doesn't make a person a teacher. Insight and wisdom are required, and that means reading and hard thought. I didn't intend *If I Die* to stand as a profound statement, and it's not. Teaching is one thing, and telling stories is another. Instead, I wanted to use stories to alert readers to the complexity and ambiguity of a set of moral issues – but without preaching a moral lesson. (278)

Through the personal narrative, O'Brien expresses his perspective that the Vietnam War was unjust by confiding his views to his reading audience and retelling his experiences before and during combat. O'Brien does not utilize If I Die as an anti-war campaign; rather, If I Die represents O'Brien's struggle between conviction and obligation. By reflecting upon the turbulent time period from different narrative angles, through first

person perspective and storytelling, O'Brien attempts to make sense out of his emotions and the war experience as a whole.

The Inner Dilemma

Since If I Die is a memoir, O'Brien provides the reader with a character sketch of himself through personal commentary and reminiscences. He presents himself as a deep thinker, one who makes sound judgements based on evidence and knowledge. O'Brien, who was drafted in 1968 after graduating from Macalaster College in St. Paul, Minnesota, lists his literary preferences in the chapter "Days," one of many instances where O'Brien reflects upon his intellectual tendencies: "I read Plato and Erich Fromm, the Hardy boys and enough Aristotle to make me prefer Plato," (Die 14). When it comes to the Vietnam War, O'Brien can not rationalize or justify his involvement. He explains to the reader in "Beginning:"

There was no certainty as to the kind of government that would follow a North Vietnamese victory or, for that matter, an American victory, and the specifics of the conflict were hidden away – partly in men's minds, partly in the archives of government, and partly in buried, irretrievable history. (Die 18)

Since, "the facts were clouded," O'Brien declares, "I was persuaded then and remain persuaded now that the war was wrong" (Die 18). His opposition to the Vietnam War is one based on intellect and a desire to do good. Despite his convictions and reservations, O'Brien submits himself to the war so as not to "upset a peculiar balance between the order I knew, and my own private world" (Die 22). O'Brien's intellectual and moral standoff with the Vietnam War is the foundation of If I Die. Serving in the "wrong war" for unsound reasons is the root of O'Brien's quandary and echoes throughout his memoir.

Although O'Brien tells his reading audience that he eventually submitted himself to the war, the narrative shifts to recollections of himself preparing to escape the conflict. In the chapter "Escape," O'Brien not only recalls entertaining the thought of fleeing the Vietnam War, but also engages in preparations to do so. He does not devise a haphazard plan; O'Brien does his homework. While in Advanced Infantry Training, O'Brien spends his free time at a library in Tacoma, Washington, devising a plan of escape. He researches the terms "AWOL" and "Desertion" to find a few ideas and decide upon a destination. He reads interviews with deserters from previous wars who had fled to Stockholm and Paris. O'Brien explains:

I was concerned with their psychology and with what compelled them to pack up and leave – but I needed something more concrete. I was after details, how-to-do-it stuff. I wanted to know the laws of the various nations, which countries would take deserters and under what conditions. (Die 55)

After much research and contemplation, O'Brien narrows his choice to Sweden. His preparation represents O'Brien's rational side. He does not present himself as one who is easily persuaded or impulsive since he puts much thought into his actions. Although fleeing the war would have repercussions, O'Brien seriously considers a one-way ticket to Sweden since it would relieve him from serving in what he considers a war that is "wrong" (Die 21). Tobey Herzog writes, "This dilemma, as well as his related thoughts on cowardice, courage, and order in his life, becomes the basis for the confessional nature of the 'auto' sections of this war autobiography – a focus on the 'I' of If I Die"(46). Although fleeing the war would have consequences for both him and his family, O'Brien

feels that it is a justifiable act, yet there is a tinge of guilt that overshadows his plans and his final decision.

As his plan for desertion illustrates, the thought of fighting for unsound reasons causes O'Brien much distress. Throughout If I Die, he reflects upon the difficulty between choosing what he feels is right and what he is required to do. His ethical convictions and his belief that the war was wrong hinder O'Brien's involvement in the Vietnam conflict. In the chapter "Beginning," O'Brien describes the solitary protest that took place in the basement of his childhood home:

I declared my intention to have no part of Vietnam. With delightful viciousness, a secret will, I declared the war evil, the draft board evil, the town evil in its lethargic acceptance of it all. For many minutes, making up the signs, making up my mind, I was outside the town. I was outside the law. (Die 20)

This recollection depicts the frustration that the Vietnam War caused O'Brien prior to submitting himself to the draft. Adhering to his beliefs, though, would involve deserting everything that is familiar to him. In an interview with Martin Naparsteck, O'Brien discusses the forces that drew him into combat:

In my own life and in If I Die, this huge thing – global politics – pushed me into the war...I think anything I've ever written has that as its center theme, even more than issues of courage – how individual human lives are influenced by global forces beyond the horizon. (6)

Regardless of his reservations, O'Brien serves in the Vietnam War. Although he reluctantly appeases his nation, and its patriotic tradition, his narrative conveys that his intellectual and moral stance against the war has not faltered.

O'Brien's concerns regarding his involvement in the Vietnam War stem from what he feels is morally right. He articulates his opposition to Chaplain Edwards, summarizing his "problem" with the war as, "one of conscience and philosophy and intellect and emotion and fear and physical hurt and a desire to live chastened by a desire to be good, and also, underneath, a desire to prove myself a hero" (56). Participating in the Vietnam War does not mesh with O'Brien's "reasoned judgements" as Philip D. Beidler writes:

The most distinctive feature of If I Die in a Combat Zone is the author's conscious attempt, without compromising the essential truth of the experience he proposes to describe, to locate that truth of experience within some more or less traditional sense of achieved context, to use the literary process as a way of investing individual conduct and belief with what may still remain of older ideas of human representativeness and centrality. (99-100)

By revealing his opposition to the war and how it conflicted with his sense of individuality, O'Brien portrays the confusing nature of the Vietnam War. Although O'Brien does not want to disrupt order, he does want to uphold his own standards -- his convictions.

Matters of Courage

O'Brien's conundrum with the Vietnam War leads him to question what he is personally capable of. O'Brien tries to explain the soldier's predicament: "Whatever it is, soldiering in a war is something that makes a fellow think about courage, makes a man wonder what it is and if he has it" (Die 140). The concept of courage is central to If I Die in a Combat Zone, one that O'Brien ponders throughout his memoir and specifically in the chapter "Wise Endurance." The question of whether submitting himself to the draft

to avoid ridicule was an act of cowardice or courage haunts O'Brien. In "Wise Endurance," O'Brien conveys how he was torn between acting accordingly, consequently defying his beliefs, or standing by his beliefs, consequently defying his nation.

In an attempt to define courage, O'Brien differentiates the degrees of bravery; is it "a way to seem to other people" or is it "acting wisely" (Die 134)? To emphasize his point, O'Brien refers to Plato's declaration that courage is "one of the four parts of virtue. It is there with temperance, justice, and wisdom, and all parts are necessary to make the sublime human being" (Die 146). Courage, according to O'Brien, has more to do with acting and reacting in accordance with one's beliefs. His profound belief that the Vietnam War was wrong never falters and intensifies as he contemplates whether he was a coward or courageous for participating in the Vietnam War. He explains that "Proper courage is wise courage. It's acting wisely when fear would have men act otherwise. It is the endurance of the soul in spite of fear – wisely" (Die 136).

With the chapter "Wise Endurance" and throughout If I Die, O'Brien articulates how the war in Vietnam led him to question his moral standards especially whether enduring the Vietnam War was a "wise" decision. O'Brien wonders, "And if right, was my apparent courage in enduring merely a well-disguised cowardice?" (Die 138). In the recollections recorded throughout his personal narrative, O'Brien questions his decision and ultimately his self-worth since he did not act in accordance with his convictions. Rather, he acted to avoid scorn and living the life of a refugee. The confessional tone of O'Brien's narrative and the manner in which he questions his motives relay the inner struggle he has with his obligations as a soldier.

Regardless of whether he fights in an unjust war or heeds his conscience, the outcome is the equivalent of cowardice. If he deserts the war, his country will label him a coward, and if he ignores his conscience and submits himself to the war, that too equals cowardice. There are many reasons, such as “Family, the hometown, friends, history, tradition, fear, confusion, exile,” that prevent O’Brien from fleeing the war (Die 68). O’Brien considers the scorn he would receive from his peers and reflects upon the possibilities and complications of escaping the Vietnam War through storytelling. O’Brien’s writing resonates with guilt both through his own reluctant involvement and his depiction of instances that illustrate the shameful nature of combat, creating a lens through which readers may consider how warfare arouses questions of courage and individuality.

The Vignettes

To counterpoint his personal commentary regarding the Vietnam War, O’Brien provides the reader with an observer’s viewpoint of combat in If I Die in a Combat Zone. Herzog observes:

A cowardice of conscience or a courage of endurance – narrator O’Brien does not completely resolve these ambiguities and conflicts over his failure as a soldier to act upon the argument of conscience and flee the war. But, as noted earlier, this moral ambiguity seems to be the point of O’Brien’s storytelling and the impetus for his many-angled considerations in later works. (50)

The brief chapters, “The Man at the Well,” “Centurion,” and “Mori,” not only offer the reader a momentary glimpse of the Vietnam War but they also depict the heinous incidents that comprise war. When asked what effect he intends a war story to have upon the listener, O’Brien replied:

Fiction in general, and war stories in particular, serve a moral function, but not to give you lessons, not to tell you how to act. Rather, they present you with philosophical problems, then ask you to try to adjudicate them in some way or another. (McNerney 10)

By providing the reader with concise images of warfare and a depiction of the Vietnamese civilians, O'Brien demonstrates how these instances cause him to question his involvement in the Vietnam War.

The chapter, "The Man at the Well," despite its brevity, emphasizes the barbarous nature of combat. By depicting a soldier's hardened spirit, O'Brien tells a story that exhibits how the Vietnam War dehumanized American soldiers. The chapter opens with a description of an elderly Vietnamese man, whom O'Brien remembers as fragile yet impressive: "He was blind. His eyes were huge and empty, glistening like aluminum under the sun, cauterized and burnt out. But the old man got around" (Die 99). O'Brien remembers the afternoon that Alpha Company spent at the old man's village as "a day as hot and peaceful as a day can be" (Die 99). In this brief episode, O'Brien tells a tale illustrating the boorish nature of soldiering in a war. O'Brien describes a relaxing and tranquil scene: American soldiers bathing in the old Vietnamese man's well, the Vietnamese children observing the soldiers with a curious eye, and later ministering them with back rubs. The instances that take place in the chapter "The Man at the Well" not only depict the Vietnamese as friendly, but they also demonstrate the domination the American soldiers had over the Vietnamese. The presence of the American soldiers makes the Vietnamese submissive, eager to comfort and entertain. Yet, this *peacefulness* does not last long.

Although concise, the chapter demonstrates the callousness that the American soldiers were capable of. O'Brien recalls how "a blustery and stupid soldier" disrupted the afternoon with unprovoked violence. As O'Brien recalls, the soldier "picked up a carton of milk and from fifteen feet away, hurled it for no reason, aiming at the old man and striking him flush in the face" (Die 100). The soldier's shameful behavior displays the dehumanizing effects of combat. In this brief instance, O'Brien presents the Vietnamese civilians as people who want to appease the American soldiers, portraying them as curious, submissive people. As if to underline the point, even after the soldier's assault, O'Brien recalls that the old man gathered his composure "and finally smiled" (Die 100). The aggressive and mindless behavior of the soldier displays how the insensitivity of combat influenced the soldier's conduct even in a nonthreatening setting. By demonstrating how an act of kindness was returned with an act of malice and ingratitude, "The Man at the Well" is an example of O'Brien's contrition, portraying the guilt he internalizes as a result of war.

Just as in "The Man at the Well," in the chapters "Centurion," and "Mori," O'Brien captures the Vietnam experience by depicting the nature of combat, relating that he not only witnessed the cruelty of warfare, but also that he witnessed the desensitization of his fellow soldiers. For instance, in "Centurion," O'Brien recalls when Alpha Company came upon an NVA rifle hidden under a shrub. After this discovery, the troops were ordered to search the village. O'Brien remembers, "We searched until sundown, not finding a thing" (Die 129). Since this was such a threatening discovery though, the lieutenants took three old Vietnamese men prisoner, gagged them and tied them to three saplings.

O'Brien conveys his disdain when he recounts discussing the matter with Bates, his confidant in the Alpha Company. Although they both found taking the men prisoner unnecessary, Bates reminds O'Brien, "This is war, my friend. You don't find a weapon and just walk away" (Die 131). In fact, there was one more act of sheer brutality before Alpha Company left the village. The next morning, one of the lieutenants whipped the old men in hopes they would tell him where the rifle came from. O'Brien reinforces the lieutenant's cruelty when he writes, "One of the old men, not the oldest, whimpered; none of them talked" (Die 132). O'Brien does not exaggerate when he describes the incident; he does not use gory, grotesque language to reenact the scene. Instead, he relies upon subtlety and short, yet direct depictions, for instance: "Alpha's Vietnamese scout shouted at them, whipping them in the legs with a long stick, whipping them across their thin bony skins, screaming at them" (Die 132). By retelling the event from a bystander's point of view, O'Brien permits the reader to visualize the occurrence, gathering his/her own image of the brutality of warfare, detail by detail (Die 132). In an interview, O'Brien reveals his intentions for writing If I Die:

I wanted to write a book about the infantryman's experience through the eyes of a soldier who acknowledged the obvious: that we were killing civilians more than we were killing the enemy. The war was aimless in the most basic ways, that is aimless in the sense of nothing to aim at, no enemy to shoot, no target to kill. The enemy was among the people. As a consequence, the fire put out was put out in massive quantities against whole villages, whole populations. I wanted to write a book that got at that. So I felt that I was doing something. (Herzog 88)

With “Centurion,” just as in “The Man at the Well,” O’Brien illustrates the savagery of wartime, recounting the brutality of the soldier’s behavior in these vignettes to illuminate the evil wrought by the Vietnam War.

By exhibiting how combat dehumanized the American soldiers, O’Brien delivers war stories that depict the uncivilized nature of wartime and how it affects the soldier. For instance, in the chapter “Mori,” O’Brien depicts the American’s insensitivity toward the Vietnamese. “Mori” features the indifference caused by warfare entwined with a hint of compassion. O’Brien tells a tale of a female Vietnamese soldier who is gunned down by a man who “didn’t know she was a woman, she just looked like any dink” (Die 113). In an interview with Brian McNerney, O’Brien comments on the language of the soldiers and his obligation as a writer, contending:

Well, on the surface it seems like an utterly misogynistic statement, and racist at that. Which it is. But my role is to report the world as it is. And that statement is a very delicate way of saying something that is said in much stronger language and much more offensive language every day by men in war. (18)

Immediately following this lewd comment, the soldier mutters, “God, she must hurt. Get the damn flies off her, give her some peace” (Die 113). It seems that since the NVA soldier is a “pretty for a gook,” the soldier feels a bit of remorse for shooting her (Die 113). In “The Man at the Well,” “Centurion,” and “Mori” O’Brien depicts examples of the soldier’s shameful conduct that is a direct result of combat. With the concise yet graphic chapters, O’Brien extends a participant’s perspective of war. Along with his personal commentary, the instances of war that O’Brien relives are a means for him to itemize his war experience. As he recounts events leading up to the Vietnam War and

then, the war experience, O'Brien provides his audience with the emotion and images of war while he sorts through the details, objectively and creatively.

By proclaiming his stance on the Vietnam War and providing examples to illuminate his position, O'Brien is coming to terms with compromising his convictions and witnessing the morbid nature of warfare. By recalling incidents that portray the effects of combat, such as the desensitization of the soldier, O'Brien's writing demonstrates the brutal struggle of the Vietnam War and his own everlasting guilt. O'Brien's commentary and recollections that comprise *If I Die*, provide the reader with a personal perspective of the Vietnam War. Beidler comments,

More than anything else, finally, a sustained meditation not only on the experience of the war but also on the very idea of sense-making itself, *If I Die in a Combat Zone* genuinely succeeds a good deal of the time in quite literally inventing its own context of vision, and in the process it makes Vietnam signify in ways that would set the example for many of the most important works to come. (100)

O'Brien presents the Vietnam conflict as two simultaneous wars: the war with his conscience and that which he endured in Vietnam. According to O'Brien, "My concerns as a human being and my concerns as an artist have at some point intersected in Vietnam – not just the physical place, but in the spiritual and moral terrain of Vietnam" (Kaplan 101). O'Brien illustrates his despair throughout *If I Die* by expressing his uncertainty about and his guilt for participating in the Vietnam War. While the memoir illustrates how the Vietnam War conflicted with O'Brien's personal beliefs and resonates with the guilt, the self-betrayal that consumes O'Brien, his fiction further demonstrates this notion.

Going After Cacciato: The Imaginary Configuration of War

Just as Tim O'Brien divulges his concerns and memories regarding his Vietnam War experience in If I Die in a Combat Zone, he channels similar apprehensions and emotions via Paul Berlin, the protagonist of Going After Cacciato. The structure of the novel is representative of Paul Berlin's thoughts and of incidents that transpire during wartime which the narrator weaves into a tale of truth and imagination. The tri-level structure of the novel tells the story of Paul Berlin, dreamer, critic, and observer, emphasizing Doc Peret's point that "war is war no matter how it's perceived. War has its own reality" (Cacciato 197). The narrator contrives a war story from Paul Berlin's imagination, innermost thoughts, and the reality from which he flees. Mostly, though, the third person narrative revolves around Paul Berlin's insecurities regarding the Vietnam War, from his own predicament as a soldier to the possibilities of a peaceful outcome. Herzog writes:

In *Cacciato* author O'Brien considers the "what if" of the flee-or-fight quandary; he employs the actions and daydreams of his alter ego Paul Berlin and other characters to analyze the process and consequences of running from war: What do people experience fleeing the war? Would they be happy? Would they be able to live with the consequences? Would their decisions end happily? (81)

The tri-level format of the novel presents the imaginary, introspective and actual angles through which Paul Berlin views the Vietnam War. In Going After Cacciato, O'Brien presents Paul Berlin's mind as the primary device he employs during wartime to sort through time past and to escape the time present.

The three-dimensional and seemingly sporadic narrative arrangement of Going After Cacciato --chapters that feature the actuality of war, Paul Berlin's thoughts and troubles,

and the imaginative journey after an AWOL soldier (Cacciato) -- consists of viewpoints that O'Brien extends to portray how war can alter one's perception. Nancy Anisfield writes:

O'Brien is showing us the importance of the imagination in survival and in establishing the framework of hope necessary for coming to terms with war.

Berlin's imaginary journey helped him cope with the terror inside him and with the nightmarish reality of combat. It also allowed him to disassociate himself from the war and the parts of it he couldn't understand. More important, however, his imagination was a manifestation of man's survival instinct in a nihilistic environment. (59)

O'Brien, the narrator, describes a map Cacciato left to assist the Third Squad on their journey: "It was a precisely drawn circle. Within the circle, in red, were two smaller circles, between them an even smaller circle, and beneath them a big banana smile" (73).

Similar to the map, Going After Cacciato is one solid work, where the three angles represent Paul Berlin's struggle: the reality of combat, the imaginative escape from it, and the attempt to understand his role as a soldier, all underlined by the Vietnam War.

Going After Cacciato is thus a story filtered through the thoughts, imagination, and actions of Paul Berlin. Jones comments on O'Brien's three dimensional narrative strategy, contending:

Partly in order to capture this sense of the war as a world apart, but even more importantly in order to underscore the spiritual growth of Paul Berlin from a state of confusion over his involvement in the war to one of transcendent self-knowledge, O'Brien employs the literary technique of "suspended coherence."

(317).

He goes on to explain, “Involved in this technique are the distortion of chronological time and the use of repetition and association in order to present a character’s experience gradually and in pieces” (317). O’Brien utilizes the “suspended coherence” technique to convey Berlin’s thoughts concerning the war, his literal existence, and the possibilities of his imagination. For instance, while Berlin is on duty at “The Observation Post,” his thoughts keep him occupied during his late night shift. Eric James Schroeder writes: “Everything that ‘happens’ in *Cacciato* happens here. Both time remembered and time imagined emanate from Paul Berlin’s ‘observation’ post” (125). While on guard, Berlin sorts through pending matters and the actuality of combat, “Separating illusion from reality. What happened, and what might have happened?” (205). The narrative is confessional, revealing from a third person perspective, how a soldier comprehends his existence during combat.

Through flight of the imagination, the reader enters a magical war, one where a platoon is on a fictitious journey to Paris after an AWOL soldier, passing through Mandalay, Afghanistan, and Tehran, and falling through a “hole” along the way. This journey takes place in the mind of Paul Berlin, an introspective, insecure soldier. The fantasy chapters, “The Road to Paris,” “Asylum on the Road to Paris” etc, reflect how Berlin copes with the Vietnam War by escaping its severity through his imagination. In an interview with Larry McCaffery, O’Brien parallels soldiering in a war to time spent in prison: “This same sense of imprisonment and stress exists in war, only heightened by the fear of death. So you retreat into your own mind. You manufacture a new reality” (273). Although the imagination is a comforting device for Paul Berlin, he recognizes that “You

could run, but you couldn't outrun the consequences of running. Not even in imagination" (Cacciato 226). The narrative shifts as Paul Berlin examines his war experience over the course of an evening while on duty at the observation post, drifting in and out of consciousness, retreating to the confines of his imagination where the possibilities are intangible yet relevant. O'Brien conveys how the imagination is a defense strategy for Berlin; his contorted vision of war is a means of survival.

From the strains of combat that soldiers endure to accounts of death, the chapters, such as "How Bernie Lynn died after Frenchie Tucker," and "Pickup Games," illuminate the actuality of the Vietnam War. By illustrating the miserable conditions of the climate and the terrain of Vietnam and how the soldiers interact and react to their environment, or the "routinization of the war," O'Brien utilizes the actuality chapters to present just how the severity of war causes one to rely on the imagination for a sense of purpose (Cacciato 44). Although the chapters pertain to the present state of wartime, the narrator reveals Paul Berlin's concerns and bits and pieces of his past, a reflective device, to convey to the reader who this daydreamer really is. All the while, O'Brien expresses the fearfulness that drives Paul Berlin to resort to the imagination as a means to make order out of disorder. O'Brien utilizes the reality of combat as the framework for the imagination. Even though the actuality chapters attempt to organize the events that Berlin survived, and serve to balance the introspective and imaginary counterparts of Going After Cacciato, the portrait of war that the chapters convey is still one of confusion.

Introspection

According to Doc Peret, Paul Berlin suffers from "an excess of fear biles" (Cacciato 28). The fear biles, just like Paul Berlin's innermost thoughts, "act as a soothing

influence, quieting the brain, numbing, counteracting the fear” (28). Yet, Paul Berlin does not regard his thoughts as an escape from the brutality of war or as a security blanket. Rather, the narrator declares that “Biles or no biles, it wasn’t dreaming – it wasn’t even pretending, not in the strict sense. It was an idea, it was a working out of the possibilities” (*Cacciato* 29). In the textual sense, the claim that Paul Berlin’s pondering serves as a means to sort through the events of war and their outcome -- attempting to make sense of it all -- also applies to the narrative structure of *Going After Cacciato*. Tim O’Brien digs into the psyche of Paul Berlin -- the pensive, imaginary, and rational -- illustrating how one cannot escape the chaotic nature of war even in the confines of the mind.

“The Observation Post” chapters are where Paul Berlin’s thoughts, the manner in which he processes them, and how he interprets his surroundings are relayed from an observer’s perspective. The narrator, Tim O’Brien, channels the “ideas” that pulsate through Paul Berlin’s mind throughout the duration of a single evening of guard duty. Schroeder contends that “O’Brien’s own ‘inner peace’ is ultimately achieved in the writing of *Cacciato*” (133). He goes on to consult an interview he conducted with O’Brien to validate that “Paul Berlin’s activity in the tower becomes a metaphor for O’Brien’s own creative act: ‘The very themes of the book are memory and imagination. In that sense [*Cacciato*’s] about how one goes about writing fiction, the fictional process” (133). By intertwining three strands within the novel, all from a third person perspective, O’Brien presents the reader with a panorama of the Vietnam War. With “The Observation Post” chapters, O’Brien presents Paul Berlin’s contemplative side,

utilizing the here and now as a narrative angle to represent the matters that most concern a soldier at war.

The introspective chapters are where the narrator attempts to decipher, on Paul Berlin's behalf, what exactly qualifies as cowardice and courage, and, most of all, are where the storyteller and the reader attempt to construct order. While at the observation post, Paul Berlin gives much thought to personal matters and recent instances of combat. The narrative is a confessional quest, revealing Paul Berlin's thoughts, which range from how he perceives himself, his role as a soldier, and the limitations of his imagination, all in an attempt to figure how he factors into it all. In an interview with Herzog, O'Brien comments that "Maybe understanding is a form of power. At least in one way, literature has to do with a search for understanding, to understand the mysterious and inaccessible. Yet we still seek it. Great fictional characters are seekers of understanding, but they are doomed to failure" (99). Similar to his memoir, If I Die in a Combat Zone, O'Brien consults his memory to write about the conflicting aspects of the Vietnam War: the battle fought within and the actuality of combat. Via Paul Berlin's insecurities, recollections, and thoughts, O'Brien combs through the mental remains of the Vietnam War, seeking understanding through a personal yet surreal portrait of the conflict.

Overcoming the Fear Biles

By escaping into thought, Paul Berlin conceptualizes, as well as fantasizes about, his involvement in the Vietnam War. The narrator portrays a pensive young soldier who feels "Excited about the possibilities, but still in control. That was the important part – he was in control. He was calm. Clear thinking helped. Concentrating, figuring out the details, it helped plenty" (Cacciato 63). "The Observation Post" chapters feature the

many thoughts that soothe Paul Berlin's worried mind as well as itemize his involvement in the Vietnam War. Couser writes, "His indulgence, while on watch, in a prolonged fantasy of escape from the war, would seem to be an extreme example of his weakness"

(4). He further asserts that

...this prolonged dream provides him finally with a way of distinguishing dream from reality and assuming responsibility for both his dream and for his part in the war. The process by which he converts his weakness into a strength and comes to his senses, literally as well as metaphorically, is dramatized by O'Brien's narrative technique. (4)

O'Brien divulges Paul Berlin's perception of the facts around him, the routine cruelties and absurdities of war, demonstrating how reality can lead one to seek refuge in imagination yet find solace in realization.

O'Brien, the narrator, captures Paul Berlin's vulnerabilities and his awareness of his distress. The narrative makes the transition from a military fairy tale to the intense thoughts of a soldier coming to terms with his war experience. Although Paul Berlin may find solace in the imaginary journey after the AWOL Cacciato, escaping the war vicariously through fantasy, his character does have a grasp on reality. The narrator defines the differentiation: "The war was still a war, and he was still a soldier. He hadn't run. The issue was courage, and courage was power, and this was his failing" (Cacciato 322). The brevity of the chapters resemble fleeting thoughts that pass through one's mind when all one has to do is think. However, "The Observation Post" is where O'Brien and Paul Berlin confront the actuality of the Vietnam War.

While lost in thought, Paul Berlin considers present matters. He contemplates occurrences from war, and the narrative conveys how Paul Berlin's conscience influences his imagination. With "The Observation Post" chapters, O'Brien displays the significance reality has on imagination and vice versa. In an interview with Larry McCaffery, O'Brien explains that

The book is primarily a book about the impact of war on the imagination. And the impact of imagination on the war. To me in the writing of *Cacciato* I was grappling with something that a person who didn't give a shit about war would care about: the life of the imagination. (273)

Paul Berlin internalizes what he has witnessed as a soldier and although he may momentarily escape the horrors of war in his mind, he does understand the severity of what is taking place before him.

The grim facts that he attempts to organize and decipher may be what drive Paul Berlin to daydream. For instance, Paul Berlin recognizes:

Billy Boy Watkins, like the others, was among the dead. It was the simple truth. It was not especially terrible, or hard to think about, or even sad. It was a fact. It was the first fact, and leading from it were other facts. Now it was merely a matter of following the facts to where they ended. (*Cacciato* 220)

As a narrator, O'Brien depicts the impact the war experience has on the mind with the organization of "The Observation Post" chapters. For instance, the brief chapters of realization are intervals between Berlin's journey of make-believe and the occurrences that he is both trying to comprehend and flee from. Early in *Going After Cacciato*, Paul Berlin ponders:

The order of things – chronologies – that was the hard part. Long stretches of silence, dullness, long nights and endless days on the march, and sometimes the truly bad times: Pederson, Buff, Frenchie Tucker, Bernie Lynn. But what was the order? How did the pieces fit, and into which months? And what was it now – November-the what? (47)

The remnants of war that Berlin sifts through are the strands that O'Brien ties together with the "suspended coherence" narrative technique. As the first glimpse from "The Observation Post" comes to a close, Paul Berlin slips into a dream, encountering "Detours on the Road to Paris." It seems that the comprehension of death and the callousness of war lead to soothing, fleeting thoughts for Paul Berlin. Although Paul Berlin understands the severity of the events that surround him, he withstands it through his imagination.

Just as Paul Berlin strives for understanding through memory and imagination, O'Brien, as a storyteller, is on a similar journey. O'Brien weaves three separate levels of consciousness into one work of fiction to project how one copes with the Vietnam War. O'Brien reveals in an interview: "For me, most of my service in Vietnam was spent in my head. I was aware of the things going on around me. I pulled the trigger when I had to and ducked most of the time. But I lived in my head a great deal" (Lomperis 48). O'Brien's angle of perception as a narrator transforms from personal to inventive, as Paul Berlin's thoughts shift. The narrative slips in and out of fantasy to represent how a soldier maintains a certain level of sanity during wartime.

Similar to O'Brien, Paul Berlin has the ability to separate illusion from reality. Although the insecurities that consume Paul Berlin as a man and soldier cause him to

resort to daydreaming, they also drive him to search inward in hopes of finding the courage to defeat the paralysis of such fears. The narrator explains:

The real issue was the power of will to defeat fear. A matter of figuring a way to do it. Somehow working his way into that secret chamber of the human heart, where, in tangles, lay the circuitry for all that was possible, the full range of what a man might be. (Cacciato 81)

With “The Observation Post” chapters, O’Brien demonstrates how a soldier attempts “to act wisely in spite of fear” (81). For instance, the confessional overtones translate Paul Berlin’s anxiety and how it affects his sense of self and what surrounds him. Yet it is the time spent on observation that is Berlin’s salvation. Dale W. Jones asserts:

If he has not actually become a hero after his nightlong vigil, he has at least come a step closer in attaining courage, wisdom, and self-knowledge. By the end of the novel, Paul Berlin has integrated the disconnected fragments of his experience and transcended the chaos of his own mind.” (320)

O’Brien conveys how, although most of the time Paul Berlin is on a “mental getaway,” he understands the severity and simple facts of his current situation. Whereas O’Brien consults the realm of imagination in the fantasy chapters, he also delves into the heart and soul of Paul Berlin to present his vulnerabilities as a soldier and as a human being.

The Journey

The search for the AWOL Cacciato, whose idiosyncrasies, according to Stink Harris, “added up to a case of gross stupidity,” is an imaginary journey with a tinge of reality (Cacciato 8). The Third Squad’s mission to Paris, although fully contrived in the mind of Paul Berlin, adheres to the inventiveness and limitations of his imagination. Berlin lapses

into this creative mindset as an escape act, fleeing from his fears via the imagination. Falling into this dream-like state provides Berlin the opportunity to, as his father phrased it, “try to look for the good things,” in war (Cacciato 63). As Berlin keeps his “eye on Paris,” O’Brien parallels consciousness with the unconscious. Fleeing the war transcends into a fantasy and thoughts of heroism are made possible, then diminished by actuality – the Vietnam War (Cacciato 64). G. Thomas Couser asserts:

A larger point is that, insofar as Paul Berlin uses his dream to achieve a comprehensive vision of the war, the book makes an implicit argument for the appropriateness, even the inevitability, of fiction – and particularly the romance – as a medium for communicating the war. (2)

By telling a story where, as Lieutenant Corson insists, “We are still soldiers and this here is still a war,” O’Brien demonstrates that although the imagination can make war time more bearable, the same “possibilities,” the realities of war, are still relevant since a dreamer must eventually awake.

O’Brien manipulates fantasy to illuminate the Vietnam War from a perspective that the average war story may overlook, displaying how daydreaming momentarily remedies a soldier’s anxiety. As Li Van Hgoc, a major of the 48th Vietcong Battalion who takes refuge in an underground tunnel, emphasizes, “Things may be viewed from many angles. From down below, or from inside out, you often discover entirely new understandings” (Cacciato 91). Couser writes that “If there is no objective reality to war, only subjective perceptions of it, then the rendering, through narrative technique, of war’s effect on the consciousness of a soldier is perhaps all we can expect of war narrative” (9). Going After Cacciato bounces back and forth from fantasy to reality, as Berlin, as well as O’Brien,

tinker with the possibilities of wartime. In Berlin's self-reflective yet imaginary odyssey, he confronts the same issues that he tackles while on guard duty at the observation post, such as whether to flee or fight and the consequences of each. O'Brien relates the tri-level structure of Going After Cacciato, especially the imaginative journey, to the writing process. Herzog writes, "According to O'Brien, these chapters also re-create the process and product of 'what I do with a typewriter...my own process of imagining that book [*Cacciato*] -- not dreaming it and not just controlling it, but a trancelike, half-awake, half-alert imagining'" (91). By manufacturing a reality, Spec Four Paul Berlin challenges his fears by a flight of the imagination just as O'Brien experiments with the possibilities of narration, channeling a war story through the artistry of Berlin.

The Power of Imagination

In the first chapter of Going After Cacciato, Berlin slips into deep thought, pondering what he should have done in terms of fulfilling his obligations as a soldier. The narrator contemplates how Berlin could have fled the war along with Cacciato and contends, "With courage, he thought, he might even have joined in, and that was the one sorry thing about it, the sad thing: He might have" (Cacciato 23). Courage, for Berlin, is not a super power that accompanies donning fatigues. Instead, it is something he, just like O'Brien in If I Die in a Combat Zone, is in search of. In an interview with Martin Naparsteck, O'Brien explains:

Fiction is a way of testing possibilities and testing hypotheses, and not defining, and so I think that more than anything the work is a way of me saying, yes, courage is clearly important in this character's life; he thinks about its importance in circumstances; the work is a way of searching for courage, finding out what it is.

That's especially true in *Cacciato*, I think, where it's both a search for courage for him to walk away from that war and also a kind of search for what courage is, what the courageous thing to do is. (5)

At a glance, it seems that Berlin is simply torturing himself over what could have been, but in actuality he, along with O'Brien, are devising a scheme. The narrator alleges that Berlin "wasn't dreaming, or imagining; just pretending. Figuring how it would be, if it were" (*Cacciato* 25). With that stated, the quest for courage, the fantasy, begins.

As Paul Berlin begins to fabricate the tale of the AWOL soldier, Cacciato, he makes mention of a photo album that Cacciato used to tote along with him. On the tattered front cover, in red, was the title VUES OF VIETNAM, and inside "arranged in strict chronological order, were more than a hundred pictures that somehow stuck better to memory than Cacciato himself" (119). Just as the photo album contains a history, the text itself, albeit scattered, unfolds as one soldier's involvement in and imaginary perception of the Vietnam War. Herzog writes:

Through his imagination this confused soldier leisurely views the war from a new vantage point – peering into the darkness through the starlight scope of his mind. In addition to passing the time, he attempts through daydreaming to transform the turmoil of his war experiences into logical, ordered, and understandable events.

(91)

Although the story line appears to revolve around a "journey" after a soldier gone AWOL, Going After Cacciato is actually about Spec Four Paul Berlin's internal quest for identity and understanding; a mission he endures in a suspended state of mind.

The questions that Berlin asks regarding Cacciato's history and behavior resemble the inner-peace that he himself is in search of. Berlin "searches for details" and wonders, "Where would Cacciato have hung his big hat? What was he after? What drove him away and what kept him going, and which way, and for how long, and why?" (Cacciato 119). Berlin's confusion leads him to drift away from his present situation and examine his existence inside and outside of the Vietnam War. The narrative interweaves fantasy and reality, displaying how Berlin lapses into his own never-never-land to come to terms with the war experience.

Fantasy Inspired by Reality

While "The Observation Post" chapters provide an introspective view of Paul Berlin, the fantasy chapters intertwine events that have actually transpired with Berlin's inventiveness, demonstrating how he utilizes his imagination as a tool to understand reality. The narrative recounts events in a seemingly haphazard manner, which represents how Berlin processes what is transpiring around him. For instance, how Bernie Lynn and Frenchie Tucker's deaths are textually organized express the impact the deaths had on Berlin. In the chapter illuminating the death of Bernie Lynn, which follows Frenchie Tucker's death, Berlin's presence is not mentioned. Instead, the narrator recounts Sidney Martin's allegiance to routine after the Third Squad loses two men in a matter of moments. The narrator summarizes the tragedy:

Sidney Martin, who had ordered Frenchie into the tunnel, and who had then ordered Bernie Lynn to go down to drag Frenchie out, knelt on one knee and looked over Bernie's wound and then went to the radio to help Ben Nystrom make the call. (Cacciato 64)

The event is relived from an unbiased perspective, and in chapters to follow, Berlin reflects upon the moment in thought and imagination. As Couser contends, “The nature of the relationship between imagination and reality, dreams and memory, varies, but the connection is always crucial; dream combines with memory to give Berlin a transcendent, binocular vision of war” (5).

This incident weighs heavily on Berlin’s conscience as he sorts through the details introspectively and examines their impact through a dream-like lens. For instance, the narrator reveals:

Noise scared him, dark scared him. Tunnels scared him: the time he almost won the Silver Star for valor....Oh, he would’ve liked winning it, true, but that wasn’t the issue. He would’ve liked showing the medal to his father, the heavy feel of it, looking his father in the eye to show he had been brave, but even that wasn’t the real issue. (Cacciato 81)

Here, the narrator conveys how Berlin’s anxiety interferes with his role as a soldier, and, although Berlin survives, he is grief stricken. His fears, and shame, cause Berlin to relive the occurrence in a disorderly fashion, lapsing in and out of the fantasy. For instance, his fantasy of falling through a hole on the road to Paris is interrupted by actuality. In the midst of conversation with Li Van Hgoc, Berlin experiences “an incomplete sense of being high in the tower by the sea. It was a queasy feeling, a movement of consciousness in and out” (Cacciato 85). The sequence of the narrative reflects the self-realization process. By stepping outside of himself, Berlin can manage his role as a soldier, yet he cannot ultimately separate himself from the tendrils of war.

After this brief interlude, Berlin is beside Li Van Hgoc, gazing through a periscope, witnessing the deaths of Bernie Lynn and Frenchie Tucker from the outside. He revisits the moment when Lieutenant Sidney Martin desperately wanted someone to go in the tunnel after Frenchie Tucker and he was afraid to step up to the call of duty. The narrator depicts the scene: “Paul Berlin stood alone. He felt the walls tight against him. He was careful not to look at anyone” (Cacciato 90). The imaginary view that Berlin has from down below animates the fear that paralyzes and haunts him. According to Couser, “For the dominant rhythm of the narrative is provided by the alternation of reality and dream; creative surges that advance the dream-journey alternate with critical pauses during which Berlin reflects on, and renews his commitment to, his dream” (6). Berlin reviews the incident and correlates it to his quandary with cowardice and thus continues his imaginary journey. O’Brien relates this sensation of insignificance in the actuality chapters as well, depicting how Berlin attempts to find purpose in a war of attrition.

Chapter Sixteen of Going After Cacciato, “Pickup Games,” illustrates a lull during combat that contributes to Berlin’s uncertainty. Paul Berlin conveys the serenity in a letter to his family:

Things were fine, he wrote, a nice quiet time with no casualties and no noise, nothing but a river fat with dragonflies and leeches and a million bugs. A good time. Times were divided into good times and bad times, and this, he told his parents, was clearly among the good times. (100-1)

Prior to this “good time,” the Third Squad conducted their routine military duties, yet “they never saw the living enemy” (Cacciato 100). To pass the time in between marches, they divided themselves into teams by squads and played basketball. In the guise of a

game of basketball, this break from their fruitless labors represents a search for purpose in the Vietnam War.

For instance, the game of basketball extends a sense of victory to Paul Berlin. O'Brien expresses how Berlin found winning gratifying, "He liked knowing who won, and by how much, and he liked being a winner" (102). The Third Squad's winning streak provides Berlin with confidence and an unofficial sense of order as the Third Squad slowly unravels. The idle soldiers turn to violence to cope with the mundane nature of war. The narrator projects an image of the unruly soldiers: "They burned hootches and shot chickens and trampled paddies and tore up fences and dumped dirt into wells and provoked madness. But they could not drive the enemy into showing himself, and the silence was exhausting" (105). Doc Peret extends his theory:

What we have here is your basic vacuum. Follow me? A vacuum. Like in emptiness, suction. Can't have order in a vacuum. For order you got to have substance, materiel. So here we are – nothing to order, no substance. Aimless, that's what it is: a bunch of kids trying to pin the tail on the Asian donkey. But no fuckin' tail. No fuckin' donkey. (Cacciato 105)

In the midst of all this chaos and hopelessness, Berlin finds solace in basketball scores and in thought. This miniscule sense of order that Berlin attempts to maintain extends a hint of purpose, although trite. The recollection ultimately demonstrates the futility of the Vietnam War, which is a catalyst for Paul Berlin's imaginative, inner-quest.

The courage that Berlin is in search of unfolds as he progresses in his imaginary journey. For example, on the way to Paris, the Third Squad encounters many fiascoes and interesting individuals. Sarkin Aung Wan, whom they meet early on in their journey,

becomes not only Paul Berlin's love interest, but also his pillar of strength. In an interview with Brian C. McNerney, O'Brien describes Sarkin Aung Wan as "an aspect of Paul Berlin's personality...She has a tenacity of spirit. She has a strength of endurance that belies her physical frailty" (21). For instance, when the squad "falls through a hole in the road to Paris," it is Sarkin Aung Wan who leads them safely through the underground tunnels, returning them to their travels. A refugee from Saigon, Sarkin Aung Wan guides the Third Squad, but, most importantly, her words of encouragement and her brave demeanor give Berlin the strength he needs to endure the war, even in his imagination.

Berlin adheres to reality by recognizing the limitations of his imagination; thus, he does not completely reinvent himself as a hero in his own fantasy. For instance, Herzog comments that

...he occasionally casts off his role as a follower and actively searches for Cacciato. In Tehran, he drives the escape car; in Mandalay, he becomes angry, disrupting the monks' evening prayers as he struggles to capture Cacciato; and when the train finally arrives in Paris, he is 'the first to step down.' (93)

Although Spec Four Paul Berlin occasionally sets his insecurities aside and shows signs of leadership, it is Sarkin Aung Wan's intelligence and persistence that make up for the areas where he falls short. Couser notes:

By inventing other characters, such as Sarkin and the VC major, he becomes more sure of himself; by imagining others' views of the war, he locates his own and assumes a commitment to it. Finally, by exercising his imagination in a new way, by pursuing his dream as far as it will take him, he learns definitely where

imagination leaves off and reality begins. (8)

Although her existence is a figment of Berlin's imagination, she urges him to realize his own potential. This is best displayed at the peace conference held at the Salle des Fetes when Sarkin Aung Wan expresses her faith in Berlin:

You are obliged, by all that is just and good, to pursue only the felicity that you yourself have imagined. Do not let fear stop you...For what is true obligation? Is it not the obligation to pursue a life at peace with itself? (Cacciato 319)

Although Berlin's vision of Paris gives him hope, his character has to slip out of reality in order to pursue the possibilities. Marching toward Paris with Sarkin Aung Wan by his side enables Berlin to visualize serenity during wartime. It is Sarkin Aung Wan who encourages Berlin to "March proudly into your own dream," not as an escape but to embrace the tranquility that is possible in the here and now (318). The concept of fighting or fleeing the war is constant throughout O'Brien's work. Just as O'Brien considers the possibilities of desertion in If I Die and finally decides to fulfill his military obligation, Berlin comes to the realization through the imaginary insistence of Sarkin Aung Wan that even in his dreams, he cannot outrun his responsibilities and thus consciously resubmits himself to the war.

The Imagination, the Writer, and the Soldier

In an interview, O'Brien offers insightful words regarding the importance of imagination in life. He explains to Tobey Herzog that "we lead our lives partly based on reason, but also based on daydream and on emotion. We tend, in general in our lives, to underestimate the power of imagination as a determinant of how we behave..." (95-6)

The three dimensional narrative, although representative of time present, past, and imagined, is O'Brien's effort to present the Vietnam War to the reader from a suspended point of view, displaying the disorienting nature of combat. Through his imaginative abilities and reflecting upon his personal involvement in the Vietnam War, O'Brien portrays how a soldier keeps himself intact through mental activity, reiterating how the imagination is a tool we employ in life as well as in fiction to make sense out of a situation. To emphasize this point, O'Brien relates the war experience to the writing process:

The mind of the soldier becomes part of the experience – the brain seems to flow out of your head, joining the elements around you on the battlefield. It's like stepping outside of yourself. War *is* a surreal experience; therefore it seems quite natural and proper for a writer to render some of its aspects in a surreal way. (267)

Through a narrative that conveys the fears that consume and perplex a soldier at war, O'Brien utilizes Berlin's mind's eye to convey the confusion that was, and still is, the Vietnam War.

Although Berlin relies heavily on the powers of imagination, he comes to the realization that "Even in imagination we must be true to our obligations, for, even in imagination, obligation cannot be outrun. Imagination, like reality, has its limits" (Cacciato 320-21). His dream may have temporarily relieved him from the strains of warfare, but it greatly assisted Berlin in coming to terms with his war experience. For instance, in the final glimpse from "The Observation Post," the narrator conveys that "Facts did not bother him," rather, "The order of facts –which facts came first and which came last, the relations among facts – here he had trouble, but it was not the trouble of

facing facts. It was the trouble of understanding them, keeping them straight” (Cacciato 322-23). The harsh reality of the Vietnam War seemed to uphold little, if any, possibility for Spec Four Paul Berlin. Yet, through their reliance on the imagination, Berlin, as well as O’Brien, are able to seek out what could have been.

The Things They Carried: Truth and Storytelling

How a story comes into existence is central to Tim O'Brien's The Things They Carried. O'Brien skillfully relives the Vietnam War as a storyteller, and casts himself as a character in the chapters, anecdotes, or short stories, that comprise The Things They Carried, fictionalizing himself to objectify his war experience. By recreating himself as "Timmy" and by voicing the complications that encompass piecing together the fragments of memories, The Things They Carried adheres to the rules of metafiction, "a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (Calloway 2). Tim O'Brien writes a story about a writer's, presumably the author's, indebtedness to storytelling. An allegiance to the truth unfolds as O'Brien, writer and veteran, relies upon invention to depict the Vietnam War, acknowledging the difficulty involved in the accurately portraying the emotion and instances of combat since "sometimes it's just beyond telling" (Things 71).

Through reinvention, O'Brien dramatizes the Vietnam War from the perspective of a veteran who is fictionally reliving his war experience, an intimate and imaginative process. For instance, in the chapter, "Good Form," O'Brien explains, "But it's not a game. It's a form. Right here, now, as I invent myself, I'm thinking of all I want to tell you about why this book is written as it is" (Things 179). Tobey Herzog writes in the introduction of his work of criticism, Vietnam War Stories: Innocence Lost that

The best tales, whether told by participants and observers remembering war or by artists imagining the experience, cut through ideological cant and battlefield action to explore the often disturbing, ambiguous, and complex elements of war, human

behavior, and life. They tell of courage, fear, cowardice, self-sacrifice, evil, life, death, and war's obscenity, as well as its attraction. (2-3)

The Things They Carried presents the hardships the men of Alpha Company endured as well as the complications that the storyteller undergoes relating the war experience.

O'Brien's objective as a writer is to explore the many angles of creating fiction -- its ambiguity, reality, and the complexities of process -- with a focus both on the trauma of the Vietnam War and the artistry of fiction.

An incentive for storytelling, according to O'Brien, is to remember the past. He writes, "Stories are for eternity, when memory is erased, when there is nothing to remember except the story" (Things 38). Yet, throughout The Things They Carried ambiguities regarding the past are abundant. For instance, the novel is "lovingly dedicated to the men of Alpha Company" yet on the page prior, there is a disclaimer stating: "This is a work of fiction. Except for a few details regarding the author's own life, all the incidents, names and characters are imaginary." Fabrication is seemingly necessary in order to correlate one's experience, hence reality, in a manner that is entertaining yet relevant to the truth. Linda Hutcheon, referring to Robert Siegel, asserts that the implications of narrative representation are:

The codes by which we organize reality, the means by which we organize words about it into narrative, the implications of the linguistic medium we use to do so, the means by which readers are drawn into narrative, and the nature of our relation to actual states of reality. (35)

O'Brien contends in an interview with Herzog that "this invented stuff, this story truth, is a way of getting at things that are true, but sometimes an author has to lie to get at it so

the reader can really feel it” (98). O’Brien writes in The Things They Carried, “I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening truth” indicating that his craft and the attention he extends to the writing process are an attempt to convey truthfully the everlasting images that remain of the Vietnam War, yet it is purely fictitious (179). By recreating his experience in the Vietnam War, O’Brien channels instances of war, the moral quandaries of the soldier, such as whether to fight or flee, the eternal guilt the soldier harbors, and the storyteller’s perseverance to make “the stomach believe” (Things 78).

Truth and the Art of Process

O’Brien writes that “the thing about a story is that you dream it as you tell it, hoping that others might then dream along with you, and in this way memory and imagination and language combine to make spirits in the head” (230). Although O’Brien relies on memories for material, to make certain incidents of the Vietnam War tangible he resorts to storytelling. Through his craft, O’Brien illustrates recollections of the Vietnam War that are tucked away in the confines of his mind, keeping the reader posted as to the difficulty of relaying such instances in a relevant and coherent manner. In terms of metafiction, Catherine Calloway writes that

In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text. (2)

By acknowledging the process of writing, O’Brien brings to light the complications of truth; although the thought may be present, articulating the intensity and exact details of a memory *truthfully* is the difficulty. By portraying the anxiety experienced before the

war, reexamining time spent as a draftee, and conveying the emotions the veteran undergoes reflecting upon instances of combat, O'Brien also critiques the process by which he animates these instances to make them resemble the truth.

The complex nature of conveying the truth is O'Brien's dilemma in "How to Tell a True War Story," one of 22 chapters that comprise The Things They Carried. The concern for storytelling that he demonstrates does not pertain to the creation of a developed story line or a well-rounded plot; rather, his storytelling objective is to relay the truth. Herein resides the difficulty, since, "In any war story, but especially a true one, it's difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen. What seems to happen becomes its own happening and has to be told that way" (O'Brien 71). Although the objective is to retell the incident justly, how the sequence of events fall into place may perplex the storyteller as well as the listener.

For instance, one characteristic of metafiction, according to Hutcheon, is "an intense self-consciousness (both theoretical and textual) about the conjunction of present action and the past absent object of that agency" (71). Therefore, O'Brien's writing reflects an urgency to deliver the emotion of the war experience, yet how the storyteller gets to the heart of the matter is troublesome. O'Brien considers that

Often in a true war story there is not even a point, or else the point doesn't hit you until twenty years later, in your sleep, and you wake up and shake your wife and start telling the story to her, except when you get to the end, you've forgotten the point again. (82)

To bring about rectitude, O'Brien emphasizes that the conjunction at hand is between the storyteller and the storyteller's past, in his case, the Vietnam War. An approximation of

the war experience is complex considering that the contents may be incoherent, yet the details connect to one another in the sense that each portrays the severity of combat. The distorted context reflects the confusion that O'Brien the writer attributes to "that surreal seemingness, which makes the story seem untrue, but which in fact represents the hard truth as it *seemed*" (71).

How O'Brien tinkers with different angles of accuracy through word play further emphasizes the duplicity of truth in "How to Tell a True War Story." Rosemary King observes that "truth is a word he uses alternately throughout the story meaning either factually accurate, or something higher or nobler" (1). The higher and nobler quality of the truth that O'Brien regards in his writing is intangible and not blatantly obvious. Its definition does not jump off the page, and the truth of the matter is hidden somewhere within the storyteller and the story he tells. In an interview with Martin Napersteck, O'Brien remarks that

Literature should be looked at not for its literal truths but for its emotional qualities. What matters in literature, I think, are pretty simple things – whether it moves me or not, whether it feels true. The actual truth should be superfluous. (8)

The truths that O'Brien attempts to convey through "How to Tell a True War Story" are saturated by other components that either stifle the point or enhance it.

For instance, O'Brien informs his audience that Curt Lemon's death is a story that gets misinterpreted time and time again, typically by a woman. This confession illuminates the storyteller's task: How to tell a story that reenacts the event as well as the emotion. The truth that O'Brien attempts to convey about the events leading up to and after Lemon's death get tangled in a web of clutter. For instance, the act of shooting a baby

water buffalo numerous times is Rat Kiley's way of mourning the loss of fellow soldier and friend, Curt Lemon. O'Brien recalls, "Nobody said much. The whole platoon stood there watching, feeling all kinds of things, but there wasn't a great deal of pity for the baby water buffalo. Curt Lemon was dead. Rat Kiley had lost his best friend in the world" (*Things* 79). What is overlooked when O'Brien tells this tale is the soldier's frustration over the steadily increasing fatality rate of fellow soldiers and the loss of camaraderie. All that appears to matter to the listener are the obscure details like "the poor baby buffalo" (O'Brien 90). Seemingly it is not the gore or the violence that O'Brien wants to captivate his audience. Rather, there is an underlying truth that certain details, like the savage killing of the baby buffalo, are meant to complement, not overshadow. O'Brien wants to illuminate a grief stricken Rat Kiley and the fear that accompanies such emotions, not the slaughter of an innocent baby water buffalo. Misconstruing the details leads to frustration and ultimately contradiction and O'Brien, as the storyteller, has the authority to reject the entire story, but rightfully so, since after all, "in a true war story, nothing is absolutely true" (88). The emotional aspects of the story -- feelings of loss, the desensitization of those involved in combat, the desire to recall the exactness of the instance -- are imperative to the storyteller yet whether or not the listener or reader comprehends the poignant contents can bring about complications.

The criterion for determining the validity of a war story that O'Brien peppers "How to Tell a True War Story" with are presented as words of wisdom, or caution, for both the storyteller and the listener. Calloway observes that "what is particularly significant about the examples is that they are given in segments, a technique that actively engages the readers in the process of textual creation" (4). According to O'Brien, the key concepts of

a war story, their truths, so to speak, are: they are “never moral,” because most of the time “a true war story cannot be believed,” and “You can tell a true war story by the way it never seems to end” (68-76). Ultimately, the truth of the Vietnam War, according to O’Brien, is that it is a story in progress, replete with ambiguity, contradiction, and multiple angles. As a result of calling the reader’s attention to invention, “the stories become epistemological tools, multidimensional windows through which the war, the world, and the ways of telling a war story can be viewed from many different angles and visions” (Calloway 1). O’Brien guides the reader in terms of how to distinguish a true war story as he sorts through how to deliver the story in a truthful and captivating manner. The guidelines that O’Brien highlights are helpful to the reader in terms of deciphering what could have occurred and what absolutely did not. However, O’Brien points out that when it comes to war, “There is not clarity... You can’t tell where you are, or why you’re there, and the only certainty is overwhelming ambiguity” (82). The concepts that O’Brien adheres to as a storyteller reveal in the difficulties of telling a true war story from the perspective of a writer and veteran considering the distorting nature of the Vietnam War; hence, the reality of the situation has to be fictionalized in order to illuminate a story that bears any semblance to the combat experience.

The Pre War Story

Whether to fight or flee the Vietnam War is the topic at hand in “On the Rainy River.” To convey the intensity of the decision, O’Brien plays the lead, as “Tim,” in this prewar story. Just like the other men of the Alpha Company: Kiowa, Norman Bowker, and Rat Kiley, O’Brien fabricates his own existence to animate the reality of war. From a first person perspective, O’Brien writes about how he was torn between the patriotic tradition

or abiding by his **personal beliefs** regarding the war. O'Brien asserts, "It was my view then, and still is, that you don't make war without knowing why" (Things 40). The confessional implications of "On the Rainy River" and O'Brien's logical stance against the war resemble the overtones of his memoir, If I Die in a Combat Zone. For instance, in "On the Rainy River," Tim reveals that "Certain blood was being shed for uncertain reasons. I saw no unity of purpose, no consensus on matters of philosophy or history and law," just as O'Brien emphasizes throughout in If I Die, "The war, I thought was wrongly conceived and poorly justified" (40,18). Although deemed fiction, O'Brien writes from a personal point of view, bearing the emotions of a college graduate contemplating his limited options in terms of complying with his conscience or his required military duties.

O'Brien considers the writing "On the Rainy River," an "act of remembrance," and asserts that "by putting the facts down on paper, I'm hoping to relieve at least some of the pressure on my dreams" (Things 39). He tells the story from the perspective of a veteran, supposedly himself, reminiscing about the summer of 1968 and how he almost fled the war. As a storyteller, O'Brien alleges that "this is one story I've never told before" (Things 39). Along with guilt, the storyteller conveys feelings of cowardice, the same conundrum O'Brien voices in If I Die. The strife that the storyteller harbors is associated with not acting in accordance with his conviction that the Vietnam War was a "wrong war" (44). In an interview with Steven Kaplan, O'Brien discusses the relevance of choice in life and in writing:

The reason choice seems to me important as a word and as a way for me to think about stories is that it involves values. It's most interesting when the choices involve things of equally compelling value, when you say, God, I really want that,

but I also want that. Or I really don't want that, and I don't want that either. (108)

O'Brien ponders Tim's limited choices in "On the Rainy River" and how he struggles with the consequences that will follow his decision. For instance, if he flees the war, he will live a life of exile and tarnish his reputation. On the other hand, if he goes to war, he will risk his own life for an immoral cause. O'Brien closes "On the Rainy River" on a somber note, disclosing the outcome of his decision, "I survived, but it's not a happy ending. I was a coward. I went to the war" (61). Conviction, fear, and obligation meet head on in "On the Rainy River" and O'Brien writes about coming to terms with the circumstances leading up to Tim's decision and with what cannot be undone.

Upon receiving his draft notice, June 11, 1968 to be exact, O'Brien recalls "a sound in my head. It wasn't thinking, just a silent howl" (Things 41). With "On the Rainy River" O'Brien expresses the anguish he endured knowing that he was going to be a soldier in the Vietnam War. He conveys the intellectual and emotional aspects of the war and how they were a battle O'Brien fought prior to combat and are still a battle within a battle. For instance, his conviction that the Vietnam War is unjust causes O'Brien to reconsider what he should do in terms of what is morally right and wrong: should he seek refuge and flee the war or submit himself to the war? O'Brien, the narrator, contends:

There were occasions, I believed when a nation was justified in using military force to achieve its ends, to stop a Hitler or some comparable evil, and I told myself that in such circumstances I would've willingly marched off to the battle.

(Things 44)

Just as O'Brien discloses his scheme to flee to Sweden in If I Die, and Paul Berlin imagines a journey to Paris, the overwhelming fear and complications of "acting wisely"

in accordance with his beliefs, are emotions that O'Brien, the storyteller, recounts (If I Die).

In a confessional manner, O'Brien reveals how his emotions felt like "real disease" as he experienced sensations that ranged "from outrage to terror to bewilderment to guilt to sorrow and then back to outrage" (Things 46). At the root of each symptom, however, is the uncertainty O'Brien felt in terms of what he should do that would ease, or rectify, his feelings toward the war. Yet, as a narrator, O'Brien is sheepish, and as the story progresses his tone indicates a sense of shame. For instance, O'Brien, confides in the reader, claiming that "Most of this I've told before, or at least hinted at, but what I have never told is the full truth" (Things 46). "On the Rainy River" is an example of how O'Brien, the writer, utilizes fiction to convey the fear of wanting to do the right thing, yet it is a decision that has many repercussions.

For example, by recreating the instance at the Armour meatpacking plant where he worked as a declassifier that summer, O'Brien illuminates the insanity he endured knowing that he may be marching toward his own death as a soldier in a war that he had no faith in. Herzog notes that "all fiction writers are literary liars; deceit is fundamental to their art" (895). Thus, O'Brien fictionalizes himself to emphasize the anxiety and fear that tormented him prior to combat, which eventually leads to "a physical rupture" which he describes as "a cracking-leaking-popping feeling" (Things 46). This sensation represents where all of O'Brien's reservations, convictions, and fears intersect. The intensity causes him to take flight and he heads to Canada, an act he feels will somehow remedy his ailment.

The adrenaline rush of driving toward his hideaway has an intoxicating effect on O'Brien, and his writing evokes the detachment he felt from his emotions. The narrative is direct as O'Brien pinpoints the numbness of knowing the inevitable outcome of his actions. He describes it as

A giddy feeling, in a way, except there was a dreamy edge of impossibility to it – like running a dead end maze – no way out – it couldn't come to a happy conclusion and yet I was doing it anyway because it was all I could think of to do.

It was pure flight, fast and mindless. (Things 47)

The despair O'Brien expresses leads Tim to the Tip Top Lodge, situated along the Rainy River, separating Minnesota from Canada. It is at the lodge where O'Brien meets Elroy Berdahl, for whom, O'Brien the writer insists, "this story represents a small gesture of gratitude twenty years overdue" (Things 48). Over the six days that O'Brien spends at the Tip Top Lodge, he considers what is and what could be in the company of "a silent and watchful presence" (Things 48). The tone of the narrative suggests a sense of gratefulness and guilt, an expression of thanks for a good deed and a confession of cowardice.

Herzog asserts that O'Brien's "narrative tricks accentuate postmodernist notions that contemporary fiction writers are preoccupied with the fictive nature of their works and the self-exposure of their invention" (895). The author-soldier, writer-veteran contradiction of "On the Rainy River" leads some to question the story's validity. For instance, is it O'Brien the writer reminiscing about his prewar experience, or is it O'Brien the fictional narrator telling a war story? Regardless, the story itself resonates with the desire to be brave, a trait that O'Brien strives for by fleeing the war and a trait that he

feels unworthy for having fought in the war. In an interview with Brian McNerney, O'Brien contends:

What is a hero? What I mean by hero is someone who behaves in a way that corresponds with his or her beliefs – if you believe you should be doing a thing, then you do it. Heroism is not determined by outside criteria; it's determined by criteria inside one's psyche, one's own conscience. (11)

With that stated, O'Brien seems to deem his own character, the young Tim O'Brien of the story, a coward for not acting in accordance with his conscience. O'Brien's tale greatly resembles the attempted escape from war that he portrays in his memoir *If I Die*, and personal experience may be what fueled the creation of "On the Rainy River," illuminating such feelings of cowardice. Overall, O'Brien successfully conveys the shame that Tim harbors, upon deciding that "I would not do what I should do. I would not be brave" (*Things* 57).

For instance, O'Brien, the narrator, brings to light the regret he bears for not having the stamina to endure the mockery of those who would not understand his decision to flee the war and live a life of exile. He confides to the reader: "Even in my imagination, the shore just twenty yards away, I couldn't make myself be brave. It had nothing to do with morality. Embarrassment, that's all it was" (*Things* 59). Even if O'Brien contrived a "story truth" on the basis of an episode from his own life, "On the Rainy River" concentrates on making the reader feel the anguish entailed in removing oneself from the security one has always known and the fear of not knowing what lays ahead.

The Post War Story

The Things They Carried portrays life during wartime as well as what life was like before and after the Vietnam War. With “Speaking of Courage,” O’Brien writes a post war story about Norman Bowker, a fellow member of the Alpha Company. Consumed by grief and the inability to discuss his war experience with the world he once knew, Norman Bowker, as described by O’Brien, copes with life after combat, especially the lingering memories. Just as O’Brien offers an extended view of the of the Vietnam War via Paul Berlin’s thoughts and imagination in Going After Cacciato, with “Speaking of Courage” he provides the reader a glimpse of war remembered and forever present through the eyes of a guilt-ridden veteran. Similar to O’Brien’s depiction of Paul Berlin gazing out at the coast of the Bantagan Peninsula, searching inwardly and imaginatively for courage, he portrays veteran Norman Bowker, circling around a lake in his father’s big Chevy, imagining how things might be different if he could find “a good time to talk” (Things 141). Tobey Herzog observes that in The Things They Carried, “Events lead to stories, to confession, to commentary, and to stories within stories, all without an apparent pattern” (108). The story of how Norman Bowker “imagined the feel of his tongue against the truth” is a tale within a tale (142). The story that O’Brien tells of a veteran tormented by the past, illustrates the soldier’s bout with courage that exists long after wartime, while it is also a story of a writer’s allegiance to the truth, to “make good on Norman’s silence” or story truth, for that matter (Things 160).

In the chapter following, “Notes,” O’Brien in the guise of a writer, explains that an actual letter from Norman Bowker, voicing despair, motivated him to write “Speaking of Courage.” The letter, O’Brien discloses, “covered seventeen handwritten pages, its tone

jumping from self pity, to anger to irony to guilt to a kind of feigned indifference. He didn't know what to feel" (156). With "Speaking of Courage," O'Brien utilizes the past to illustrate the haunting nature of the Vietnam War. His intention for writing "Speaking of Courage," according to O'Brien, was to recount the evening that Kiowa died in "the shit field" along the Song Tra Bong, an incident that haunts Bowker (159). Throughout the story, he returns to the image of Kiowa sinking in the field and Bowker's attempt to save him. O'Brien describes this to the reader:

He would've talked about this, and how he grabbed Kiowa by the boot and tried to pull him out. He pulled hard but Kiowa was gone, and then suddenly he felt himself going too. He could taste it. The shit was in his nose and eyes. There were flares and mortar rounds, and the stink was everywhere – it was inside him, in his lungs – and he could no longer tolerate it. Not here, he thought. Not like this. He released Kiowa's boot and watched it slide away. (149)

Bowker imagines how he could possibly share this occurrence, an explanation of why he believes he did not win the Silver Star for valor, just as he wonders what the response of his listener would be. In Bowker's mind, he was not as brave as he could have been and his father would have recognized this and would console him by commending his other medals, "Seven. Count 'em. You weren't a coward either" (Things 142). His deceased childhood friend, Max "who loved fine lines" would have appreciated the tale as well (Things 153). O'Brien conveys how a soldier can never completely forget, or forgive, what transpired during combat in "Speaking of Courage." Along with expressing the veteran's guilt regarding the war, O'Brien denotes the trauma of living with the Vietnam War, as a veteran and a writer.

O'Brien explains to the reader in "Notes," "By telling stories, you objectify your experience. You separate it from yourself. You pin down certain truths. You make up others" (158). The story of Norman Bowker captures a sense of loss and detachment just as it demonstrates O'Brien's determination to depict such emotions through storytelling. Although the story is fictional, it contains presumed specifics like the existence of Norman Bowker and the death of Kiowa. O'Brien asserts that the original version of "Speaking of Courage," intended for Going After Cacciato, was problematic since it was a postwar story and it lacked the truth. He explains that "something about the story had frightened me – I was afraid to speak directly, afraid to remember – and in the end the piece had been ruined by a failure to tell the full and exact truth about our night in the shit field" (Things 159).

Yet in an interview with Martin Naparstek, O'Brien contradicts his allegation cited above, contending that in writing The Things They Carried:

I blended my own personality with the stories, and I'm writing about the stories, and yet everything is made up, including the commentary. There was no Norman Bowker. The point being, among others, that in fiction we not only transform reality, we sort of invent our own lives, invent histories, our autobiographies. (8)

There is no apparent distinction between Tim O'Brien the author and Tim O'Brien the narrator, or "Tim" the character, or the writer featured in the text since The Things They Carried is a work of fiction where a writer is discussing how stories can "make the dead talk;" in other words, stories make the past present (O'Brien 232). O'Brien asserts in an interview with Brian McNerney, "I guess I decided to become a fiction writer so I wouldn't have to obey the normal rules of fact and truth" (8). Tim O'Brien may be

calling upon memory to compose war stories that depict the reality of war, but The Things They Carried is a work in pursuit of “story-truth,” not a strict chronology of the Vietnam War experience. Although the demise of two fellow soldiers and the reenactment of his flight to Canada may be an idea purely extracted from O’Brien’s imagination, as a surviving veteran writing about the horrific details of the Vietnam War, O’Brien’s attempt to illustrate the everlasting and sometimes fatal guilt associated with combat -- a truth all too real -- must be considered within the fictional nature of the text.

As a storyteller, writer, and character in The Things They Carried, O’Brien examines the past, its factual and emotional content, and channels it through a work of fiction. O’Brien looks at the past from a present standpoint and from within, displaying versatility as a writer and as an individual attempting to make sense of it all. Hutcheon deems that:

Postmodern fiction does not, however, disconnect itself from history or the world.

It foregrounds and thus contests the conventionality and unacknowledged ideology of that assumption of seamlessness and asks its readers to question the process by which we make sense and construct order out of experience in our particular culture. (53)

Just as O’Brien’s work is in a literary category that challenges the boundaries of storytelling, the content matter of The Things They Carried challenges societal norms and wartime tradition. O’Brien’s moral quandary in terms of what is considered commendable in our culture, for instance soldiering in a war that he felt was unsound, is reenacted through the stories that comprise The Things They Carried. Through storytelling, O’Brien strives to explain what it is that occurred during the Vietnam War

both historically and emotionally, the struggle that it presented then and the struggle that still persists in the here and now. As O'Brien contends in "Notes:"

Telling stories seemed a natural, inevitable process, like clearing the throat. Partly catharsis, partly communication, it was a way of grabbing people by the shirt and explaining exactly what happened to me, how I'd allowed myself to get dragged into a wrong war, all the mistakes I'd made, all the terrible things I had seen and done. (Things 158-9)

Fiction not only offers O'Brien the chance to make his audience aware of the Vietnam War, but it also allows O'Brien to personalize and reinvent his experience as a soldier by way of storytelling. The Things They Carried, as well as If I Die, and Going After Cacciato, can be considered O'Brien's relentless effort to sort through and organize the fragments of the Vietnam War, the nightmarish images and his stance against it which has not faltered, with the assistance of various narrative techniques.

Conclusion

With each work, If I Die in a Combat Zone, Going After Cacciato, and The Things They Carried, Tim O'Brien reevaluates his experience in the Vietnam War. From different narrative angles, O'Brien examines the remains of combat: the lucid memories and unchanging guilt. O'Brien creates and takes on numerous identities through narration, presenting the reader with circumstances that occurred before, during and after combat, to demonstrate the soldier's strife and reanimate what he recollects of the Vietnam War. Yet with each text, the same issues are present: whether to fight or flee, cowardice, and guilt, and O'Brien as a narrator, author, and character, never comes to a conclusion as to the definite nature of warfare. In terms of Vietnam War literature, Gordon O. Taylor writes:

At their best, such probings toward mutual clarification of inward and outward events acquire a form faithful to the simultaneity of introspective and documentary concern. They spin double helixes of inward and outward observation, books necessarily and inextricably within books. Such narrative seeks both to diagnose and to regenerate damaged mental and moral tissue, the personal to some degree representative of the national wound and prospect for recovery. (298)

O'Brien insists that "I did not look on my work as therapy and still don't;" however, communicating his experience seems to be an addiction for O'Brien and his obsession lies with trying to unravel the meaning of the war experience although the answer is indeterminable (Things 158).

With writing as a medium, O'Brien elegantly delves into the "mystery and terror and adventure and courage and discovery and holiness and pity and despair and longing and

love” of war (Things 80). The clarification that O’Brien as a storyteller is seeking, however, does not resolve itself in his writing. Although the evidence, or memories, have been combed through, an answer or meaning does not present itself and the three works pertaining to the Vietnam War end in limbo, never achieving an absolute resolution. For instance, O’Brien’s memoir If I Die in a Combat Zone concludes in an ambiguous manner. Although O’Brien is on a flight returning home from the war in the final chapter “Don’t I Know You,” the depiction he offers does not illicit excitement or valor. For example, O’Brien describes partaking in “a ritualistic shout,” with the other returning soldiers, “trying to squeeze whatever drama you can out of leaving Vietnam” (If I Die 206). The act makes an impersonal impression on O’Brien and he deems it artificial more than ceremonial. Rather, O’Brien savors the sacred moment and takes into consideration the insight he has gained as a soldier in that war.

O’Brien does not revel in reunion; instead he ponders the good and the bad aspects of combat: “You add things up. You lost a friend to the war, and you gained a friend. You compromised one principal and fulfilled another” (If I Die 207). He also reveals that he has learned “that war is not all bad; it may not make a man of you, but it teaches you that manhood is not something to scoff,” as well as, “dead bodies are heavy,” “fear is paralysis,” and most importantly, “anyone can die in a war if he tries” (If I Die 208). Regardless of all the lessons O’Brien learned as a surviving soldier of the Vietnam War, there is still the unresolved, internal conflict, caused by the belief that the war was wrong and yet he served in it. For this reason, the return to what was once normalcy contains the same uncertainty as arriving in Vietnam. O’Brien professes in an interview with Herzog that “The element of perception has to do with uncertainty” (102). Whereas

O'Brien had to adjust to the role of a soldier, he now has to adhere to the role of a veteran, readjusting to a world that will never fully understand what it is to fight a war both physical and within. For instance, there is a hint of displacement when O'Brien beholds the "empty, unknowing, uncaring, purified, permanent stillness" of Minnesota (If I Die 208). There is a great, unknown sense of what is to come as the memoir closes and the perspective that O'Brien achieves with If I Die is one of constant uncertainty. The obvious revelation is that O'Brien survived the war yet he still has to cope with the guilt he internalizes for not acting on behalf of his belief that the Vietnam War was unjust.

The reader is left without a sense of closure at the end of Going After Cacciato. As the novel comes to a close, Paul Berlin and the lieutenant are discussing what will become of Cacciato. Although there are "miserable odds" against the AWOL Cacciato, all that is left to say regarding his destination is "Maybe so" (Cacciato 236). This ties in with Paul Berlin's epiphany that "with courage it might have been done," leaving the reader with many possibilities to ponder, yet there is no certainty as to whether Cacciato makes it to Paris or, if Paul Berlin ever fully embraces courage, for that matter (Cacciato 323).

Going After Cacciato reflects O'Brien's testimony that "the best literature is always explorative. It's searching for answers and never finding them" (Naparsteck 5). Even in work of fiction, O'Brien does not invent a situation where a sound conclusion about combat is made. Although Paul Berlin can conceptualize, "the order of facts – which facts came first and which came last, the relations among facts – here he had trouble, but it was not the trouble of facing facts. It was the trouble of understanding them, keeping them straight" (323). With that stated, the final chapter of the novel upholds the same

title as the first chapter, “Going After Cacciato,” as Paul Berlin wakes from his dream, focusing on his existence in what is and what could have been in terms of the Vietnam War.

The final chapter of The Things They Carried demonstrates incertitude as well. However, there is an emphasis on how storytelling can make the uncertain past present and tangible. Through the miraculous art of storytelling, O’Brien reiterates his authority as an author conveying how “stories can save us” (Things 236). With the assistance of imagination, O’Brien insists, “I can revive, at least briefly, that which is absolute and unchanging” (Things 236). For instance, Kiowa’s death is an event that O’Brien returns to throughout The Things They Carried. He depicts the atmosphere and moment when Kiowa lost his life in “the shit field” along the Song Tra Bong, how his death haunts Norman Bowker long after the war, and the impact Kiowa’s death had on a young soldier named Tim O’Brien. Just as O’Brien alleges in the chapter, “How To Tell a True War Story,” “you can tell a true war story if you just keep on telling it,” Kiowa’s death represents a war story in which understanding the truth unfolds with each narrative attempt (85). Through Kiowa’s death, O’Brien depicts the fatal nature of war, and how it affects the soldier during and after combat.

Although writing permits O’Brien the opportunity to illuminate both the instances and the emotions of combat there is no final consensus as to what the Vietnam War was and forever will be. Beidler writes: “For most Americans in Vietnam, however, nothing in the war, it seemed, ever really began for any particular reason, and nothing in the war ever really ended, at least as it concerned those still living and unwounded” (3).

O’Brien’s work concerning the Vietnam War reflects Beidler’s notion in that through

each narrative attempt, the absurdities of war are still relevant and never ending.

However, the revelation O'Brien makes is that through storytelling, whether it is memoir, fiction, or metafiction, he, as well as the past, are made ever changing and immortal.

O'Brien closes The Things They Carried proclaiming eternal life through the craft of writing:

I'll never die. I'm skimming across the surface of my own history, moving fast, riding the melt beneath the blades, doing loops and spins, and when I take a high leap into the dark and come down thirty years later, I realize it is as Tim trying to save Timmy's life with a story. (246)

O'Brien recreates the Vietnam War experience through numerous voices, his own, Paul Berlin's, and "Timmy's," displaying what the soldier endured and how the soldier survives through storytelling. O'Brien notes in an interview with Naparstek that "I hope that my work will ultimately have its effect in understanding the war of living" (24).

Conviction, cowardice, and guilt, are feelings that not only pertain to soldiering in a war but to everyday life, according to O'Brien. He goes on to say, "I hope that when my books are read, they'll reverberate for those reasons, for those who have never experienced war and never will, but experience daily, a different war: the war of life itself" (24). O'Brien's self-conscious and inventive creative ability presents the reader with an altered yet precise view of the Vietnam War: how one manages through combat and survives war's ramifications through storytelling. There may not be a concise explanation for the Vietnam War as a whole but by way of storytelling, O'Brien relates its overall reality to an audience who would not otherwise know.

Works Cited

- Anisfield, Nancy. "Words and Fragments: Narrative Style in Vietnam War Novels." In *Search and Clear: Critical Responses to Selected Literature and Films of the Vietnam War*, ed. William Searle, 56-61. Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1988.
- Beidler, Philip D. American Literature and the Experience of Vietnam. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1982.
- Calloway, Catherine. "'How to Tell a True War Story': Metafiction in The Things They Carried." *Studies in Contemporary Fiction*. (June 1995): 249.
- Couser, G. Thomas. "Going After Cacciato: The Romance and the Real War." *Journal of Narrative Technique*. B.1 (Winter 1983): 1-10.
- Herzog, Tobey C. Tim O'Brien. New York: Twayne, 1997.
- Vietnam War Stories: Innocence Lost. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *The Politics of Postmodernism*. Ed. Terrence Hawkes. New York: Routledge, 1989.
- Jones, Dale W. "The Vietnams of Michael Herr and Tim O'Brien: Tales of Disintegration and Integration." *Canadian Review of American Studies*. 13.3. (Winter 1987): 309-320.
- O'Brien, Tim. Going After Cacciato. New York: Broadway, 1978.
- . If I Die in a Combat Zone. New York: Broadway, 1975.
- . The Things They Carried. New York: Broadway, 1990.
- Interview with Tobey Herzog. The South Carolina Review 31.1 (1998): 78-109.
- Interview with Steven Kaplan. The Missouri Review. 13.4. (1991): 95-108.
- "Anything Can Happen: Interviews with Contemporary American Authors." Interview with Tom Lellair and Larry McCaffrey. Urbana, IL U of Illinois Press. 1983: 262-78.
- Interview with Martin Naparstek. Contemporary Literature 32 (Spring 1991): 1-11.
- "Journeying from Life to Literature: An Interview with American Novelist Tim O'Brien." Interview with Lynn Wharton. Interdisciplinary Literary Studies A Journal of Criticism and Theory. 1.2. (Spring 2000): 229-47.

McNerney, Brian C. "Responsibly Inventing History: An Interview with Tim O'Brien." *War, Literature, and the Arts*. 6.2 (Fall/Winter 1994): 1-26.

Schroeder, Eric James. "The Past and the Possible: Tim O'Brien's Dialectic of Memory and Imagination." In *Search and Clear: Critical Responses to Selected Literature and Films of the Vietnam War*, ed. William Searle, 116-34. Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1988.

Taylor, Gordon O. "American Personal Narrative of the War in Vietnam." *American Literature*. LII.2 (May 1980):294-308.